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## Remains of a French Post near Trem- pealeau

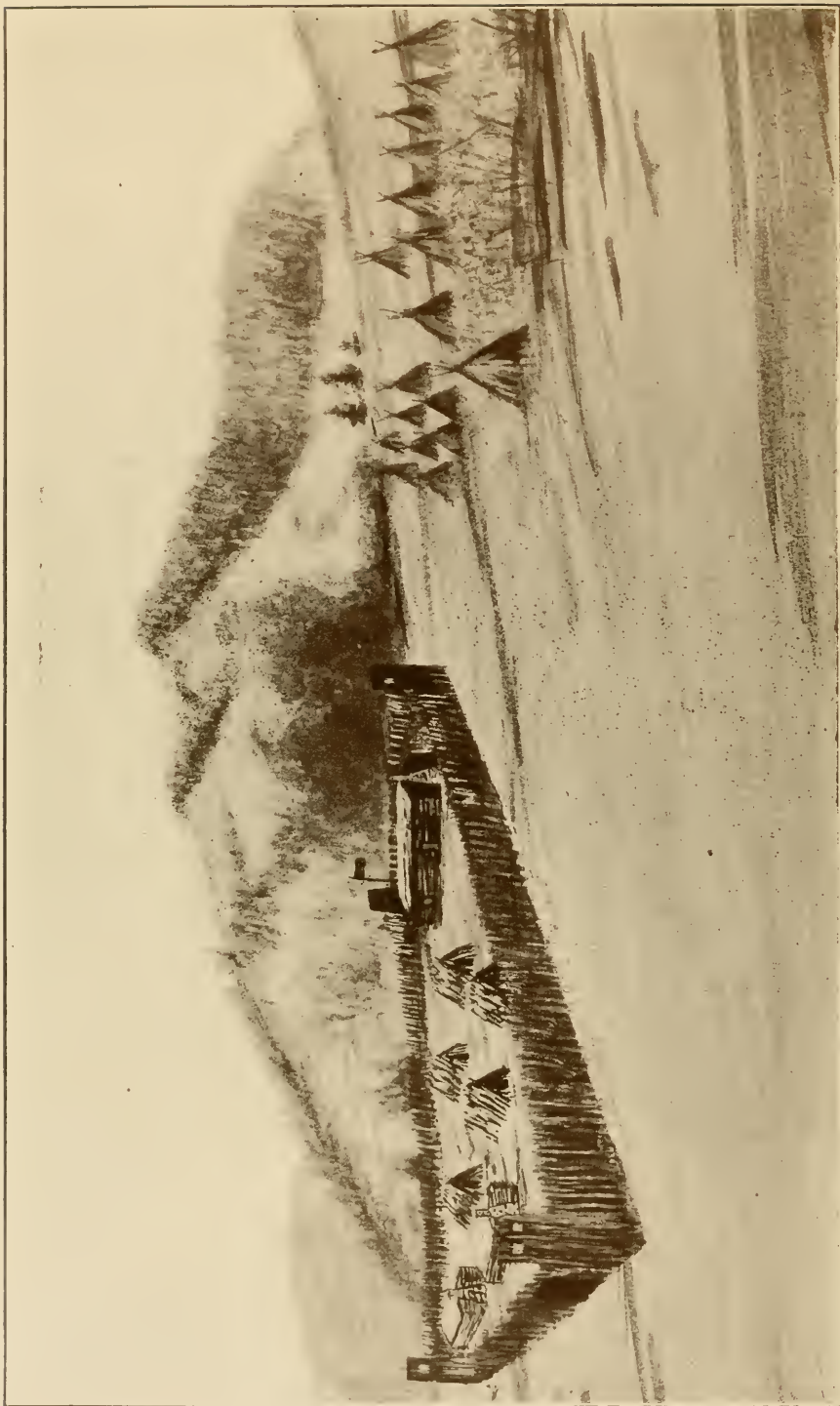
- I. Archeological Sketch, by Eben D. Pierce
- II. Additional Archeological Details, by  
George H. Squier
- III. Historical Sketch, by Louise Phelps  
Kellogg



The State Historical Society of Wisconsin  
Separate No. 167  
From the Proceedings of the Society for 1915







THE OLD FRENCH POST NEAR TREMPÉALEAU  
From an idealized sketch by Mrs. Hettie M. Pierce

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## Remains of a French Post Near Trempealeau<sup>1</sup>

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### I. Archeological Sketch: by Eben D. Pierce

In the early eighties Dr. Lyman C. Draper, then secretary of the State Historical Society, received a request from the French Academy of History for information regarding the location of Perrot's post, as indicated on Franquelin's map of 1688, a few miles above the mouth of Black River on the east bank of the Mississippi. Doctor Draper sought the assistance of A. W. Newman, of Trempealeau, later justice of the Wisconsin Supreme Court, who was much interested in local history. He enlisted the services of Judge B. F. Heuston, then at work on a history of Trempealeau, who took up the work with enthusiasm and carefully searched the riverside of the bluffs for some mark of the ancient fort. He made several journeys to Trempealeau bay in the vain effort to find some trace of the early post, as the bay would seem to have afforded an excellent site for wintering quarters.

Meanwhile, some of the workmen engaged in grading the Chicago, Burlington & Northern Railway along the river discovered, about two miles above the village, the remains of fire-

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<sup>1</sup> Although the French occupation of Wisconsin lasted more than a century and we have documentary evidence of the existence within its boundaries of ten or more regular posts, built by orders of the government, aside from fur trading posts, nevertheless, there is no archeological evidence of the exact site of any of them, unless the evidence concerning the one near Trempealeau may be so considered. The presentation of this evidence by two Trempealeau residents, one of whom was active in the discovery of the post, is supplemented by a summary of the documentary material written by a member of the Society's staff. It is interesting to note that, by working from separate points of view, similar conclusions have been reached; in view of the evidence presented it seems fair to suggest that these remains should no longer be styled "Perrot's Fort" without some qualifying or additional statement.



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places or hearths. Judge Heuston, hearing of these finds, decided to visit the place and investigate. He selected George H. Squier to assist him and accompanied by Antoine Grignon and W. A. Finkelnburg of Winona, they went to the place where the fireplaces had been uncovered and began excavations. The next spring, Judge Newman having communicated these facts to the State Historical Society, Reuben G. Thwaites, then the newly elected secretary of the Society, came to Trempealeau and on April 18, accompanied by W. A. Finkelnburg and the local historians, made a historical pilgrimage to the site of the post that had been found, and continued the excavations.<sup>2</sup>

The first fireplace had already been laid bare, and Mr. Squier had succeeded in tracing by a line of charcoal the former wall of the building. The dimensions of the building were about twenty by thirty feet; the fireplace was two and a half feet in depth and four feet long with enclosing walls at back and sides. The chimney had undoubtedly been a wooden structure made of small logs with clay daubing, as there was not stone enough found to indicate a stone chimney.

A blacksmith's forge was also unearthed, together with some scrap iron, and a pile of charcoal which had evidently been used in a smelter. A pile of slag, some sixteen feet in diameter, was found showing that the occupants of the post had attempted smelting. The slag consisted of a mixture of iron ore and limestone. The remains of the smelting furnace were also found. Other relics discovered included some hand-wrought nails, buffalo bones, an old-fashioned flintlock pistol, a gun barrel, and an auger. The pistol was of excellent make, which led Mr. Squier to believe that the explorers had excavated the officers' quarters. Seven of the original buildings were unearthed in all; one was left undisturbed.

James Reed, the first settler in this county, said that when he first came to Trempealeau in 1840, he had noticed the elevated foundations at this place, where part of the fireplace protruded above the sod, but as the region abounded in Indian mounds of various types, he had attached no especial significance to this

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<sup>2</sup> The arrangements for this meeting were made by B. F. Heuston. In addition to R. G. Thwaites, of Madison, and N. H. Winchell, of St. Paul, some forty or fifty persons interested in such work came from La Crosse, Winona, and other adjoining places.



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particular elevation. There was, however, a lingering tradition among the Indians of the locality concerning a French fort near the sacred Trempealeau Mountain.

In the summer of 1912 George H. Squier, Antoine Grignon, and the writer did some excavating at this site. By a cross-sectional excavation we were able to pick up the charcoal line of the main building and follow it several feet, and from this it was possible to verify Mr. Squier's early estimate of its dimensions. We also found, besides charcoal, numerous bones, among which were the jawbone of a beaver, the toe bones and claw of a bear, and some large bones either of elk or buffalo.

The place was well selected for wintering quarters. It lay near the head of a slough which, setting back from the Mississippi, afforded a quiet harbor free from the menace of floating ice. Springs exist in the side of Brady's and Sullivan's peaks a quarter of a mile away, but the river water was drinkable, and there was an abundance of firewood. The bluffs protected the post from the cold north and east winds.

## II. Additional Archeological Details: by George H. Squier

It is now nearly thirty years since the French post at Trempealeau was first discovered, and those who had part in that discovery have nearly all passed away. As it chanced the writer was the first to uncover any portion of the remains, and it was also his fortune that this first site explored was that of the most important and best constructed of the group and afforded a key to the construction plan and the identity of the remains. To the brief account given in the tenth volume of the *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, the writer is the only one alive who is able to add from first-hand knowledge, details that were noted but not recorded at the time the post was first laid bare.

In describing the remains one basic fact must be borne in mind, namely, that they show two distinct periods of occupancy the earlier of which was probably that of Perrot, the later with little doubt represented by Linctot. Most of the descriptions, therefore, must apply to the later rather than to the earlier post. The only portion of the remains which can confidently be ascribed to the earlier period is the lower of two hearths occupying the same site.

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If there were any other remains of this earlier period, they were indistinguishably mingled with those of the later. This earlier hearth was less carefully constructed than the later, hence we may conjecture that Perrot's accommodations were cruder than those of Linctot. So far as the character of the construction could be judged from the remains, it by no means equaled the average squatter's cabin in solidity and permanence, and there was nothing whatever to indicate any attempt at defensive construction.

Of the hearths other than the largest one, which was the first to be uncovered, it is believed there were five, two of which were removed in grading the railway. In comparison with the first, these five were much inferior in construction, the hearthstones being very irregular in form with no indications of backs or chimneys. As this would indicate that the smoke escaped through the roof, it would point to structures very little removed from Indian tepees slightly modified for white occupancy. Their true positions with reference to Number 1 and to each other were not determined, but their distribution was rather irregular.

In front of the supposed officers' quarters were two constructions representing the industrial equipment of the post. One of these was the blacksmith's forge. The excavations about this were conducted by the owner of a private museum at St. Paul, Minnesota, assisted by Antoine Grignon. As was to be expected this furnished the greater portion of the metal relics. Among them I remember a pistol, an auger, a staple, some nails, and several bits of scrap iron. The other construction, which was explored by myself, undoubtedly represented an attempt to reduce our local iron ores by the open-hearth process. There were the remains of a large pile of charcoal several feet in diameter, and a considerable pile of the resultant slag, representing material in all stages of fusion from the glassy to that showing unfused fragments of the ore and limestone intimately commingled. That this ore, a residual from the decay of limestone and usually associated with flint, is not now very abundant about the Trempealeau bluffs is believed to be in part due to the fact that it was largely gathered up by the occupants of this post, since it occurs in considerable abundance in many other Mississippi River bluffs.

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It seems probable that Linctot's occupancy was something more than temporary, and represented a tentative attempt to establish a permanent post, which, however, was soon abandoned. There are evidences that the French scoured the region for a considerable distance around the post—an ax of the period having been recovered from a shallow pond three miles eastward.

The relation these remains bear to Indian antiquities is worthy of notice. A considerable group of mounds occurs only a few rods west of the site, and a single mound appears on the rather prominent stony point in front of the post. There are some peculiar features, not found elsewhere in this region, in the manner of disposal and burning of the skeletons covered by this mound; while conspicuously different from the usual Indian methods they are much like primitive methods practised in Europe. It seems reasonable to suppose that the French were in some way concerned in these burials. It may be noted that the lower of the two hearths on the supposed site of the officers' quarters was itself built over an Indian bake hole in which ashes and bones were ofund.

Before the uncovering of the site there was nothing in any way resembling a tumulus. Indeed, the surface was more even than it is now, for in the process of excavation the dirt was heaped up in places. At the largest hearth the clay with which the chimney had been plastered formed a covering a few inches thick over the natural surface, but the rise was so small and the slope so gentle that it was scarcely recognizable. The one feature noted by James Reed and Antoine Grignon, which led to the final discovery of the place was that the sides and back of the hearth, formed of small flat stones, projected an inch or two above the surface. The construction was so rude, however, that Judge Heuston, W. A. Finkelnburg, and Antoine Grignon, who preceeded me to the place, after examining some of the top stones concluded that it was not artificial and went on to the bay. Coming up after they had left, there seemed to me something in the arrangement not quite natural, and working around carefully with a garden trowel I quickly exposed the outlines, and by the time they returned from the bay the hearth was fully exposed. The hearth proper was about two by four feet in dimensions, while the outside dimensions of the chimney

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were probably about twice as large. The sides and back were built of small flat stones laid in clay to a height somewhere between one and two feet, above which the chimney construction must have been of small logs plastered with clay, in which a considerable amount of grass was mixed for better binding. The hearths themselves were of such flat stones as could be found in the vicinity, the best of them being used in this hearth at the officers' quarters. With the possible exception of some slight trimming of the edges no tool work had been given them. But this and the underlying hearth were covered by several inches of ashes with which were mingled numerous fragments of bones of birds and small animals. The larger bones were thrown out back of the hearth which was evidently at the western end of the principal building.

It is probable that the stone construction did not extend much more than a foot above the hearth and that these stones were mostly in place when the remains were discovered. Very few stones were found mingled with the débris around the hearth, which could hardly have been the case had any considerable height of such construction fallen down. It is probable that the log enclosure was built up from the ground of sufficient size to permit a protective interlining, which at the bottom was of stones laid in clay. After the supply of stones gave out the construction was continued of clay alone as high as needed. Used in this way the stones were added as fillers, much as we do in concrete constructions with little effort to arrange them in orderly sequence.<sup>3</sup>

According to cross-sectional excavations made in the summer of 1912 the dimensions of this building were twenty by thirty feet; but these figures are to be looked upon as merely a conjectural estimate.<sup>4</sup> There was nothing whatever to determine

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<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the foregoing overstates the case somewhat. The stones were laid about as closely and carefully as was possible with the material—small, thin fragments from the Mendota limestone. It seems not unlikely that the builders overestimated the amount of such material easily available.—G. H. S.

<sup>4</sup> There is a large rock, the only object breaking the otherwise clear surface of the site, which would have been included in a building of the size and emplacement here given. The rock, of hard, local sandstone, stands upright, deeply bedded in the earth and rising nearly three feet above the surface. It is not clear why this should have been included in the building unless it was thought it might be utilized. The one plausible conjecture, that it might have furnished



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the position of the south wall, and the evidence concerning the location of the east wall was very slight. The distance from the northwest corner to the south side of the hearth was about ten feet. Five or six feet should be allowed for a door, which there is reason to believe existed on the west side south of the hearth, so that an estimate of twenty feet for the width of the building can not be regarded as excessive. As far as traced, the north wall was a straight, even, sharply defined line of charcoal, perhaps ten inches wide. Nothing which could be regarded as its counterpart was found on the east side.

### III. Historical Sketch: by Louise Phelps Kellogg

The character of the French posts in Wisconsin was determined by the conditions under which they were built. A thousand miles from the source of supplies, dependent upon transportation by birch-bark canoes upon rapid rivers where frequent portages must be made, isolated in dense forests, far from other habitations, the economy of the post was of necessity primitive and almost wholly self-sufficing. The forest and its dwellers furnished wood, bark, skins, and meat. Next in importance came tools, which were brought from the colony, but repaired and supplemented by the blacksmith who accompanied every garrison; and wherever possible, lead and iron were obtained from the vicinity by such crude methods of smelting as it was possible to carry on. The posts were rough log structures, but the exigencies of the Wisconsin climate made fireplaces and chimneys, improvised from whatever materials could be obtained, essential. Usually the group of rude log huts, the smithy and the storehouses, was enclosed by a palisade for protection against wild beasts and hostile red men. Such was the riverside post of the French régime in Wisconsin, whose ruler, usually an officer in the colonial army, was grandiloquently styled a commandant.

It has not been definitely ascertained when or by whom the first French post in Wisconsin was built. The custom of utilizing the Jesuit missions, centers of trade and hospitality, for treating

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the back for a fire, was not borne out by an examination. The presence of this stone furnishes a seeming objection to the other evidence concerning the arrangement of the building.—G. H. S.

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with the Indians makes it uncertain whether there was a French post at Green Bay during the seventeenth century. The first commandant whose name we possess was Nicolas Perrot, erstwhile trader and interpreter in the Northwest for twenty years.<sup>5</sup>

Perrot arrived at Green Bay, where he was already well known, in the late summer of the year 1685. He found the Indians restless and inclined to intertribal wars, so that some time was spent in their pacification. It was later than he had planned, therefore, when he set out for the country of the Sioux, where he hoped to secure a great harvest of valuable furs. After crossing the Wisconsin portage, and proceeding down that river to its mouth, he turned his little fleet of canoes boldly upstream; but as the weather was growing cold and traveling difficult, they "found a place where there was timber, which served them for building a fort, and they took up their quarters at the foot of a mountain, behind which was a great prairie, abounding in wild beasts."<sup>6</sup>

To one familiar with the topography of this section, the description of the site of Perrot's wintering quarters in 1685-86 is very clearly that of the Trempealeau Prairie, because there are the only bluffs near the river having a large prairie in their rear and Trempealeau Mountain, moreover, is a well-known landmark on the upper Mississippi.<sup>7</sup> In addition to this indication we have that of the well-known map of Jean Baptiste Louis Franquelin published in 1688, and based undoubtedly on information obtained from Perrot himself.

Franquelin, an engineer of repute and royal hydrographer, visited New France in 1687. His famous map of Louisiana in 1684, drawn to display La Salle's discoveries, has but few indi-

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<sup>5</sup> Perrot has been called by Benjamin Sulte "the great Frenchman of the West," Canadian Royal Society, *Proceedings and Transactions*, 3rd ser., VI, pt. 1, 12. Born about 1644, he came to New France in his youth and at least as early as 1665 visited Green Bay and for five years traded with the neighboring nations. In 1671 he was interpreter at St. Lussou's pageant at Sault Ste. Marie. His career during the next fourteen years is obscure, part of the time being spent at his seigniory on the St. Lawrence. In 1685 La Barre commissioned him commandant of La Baye and its dependencies.

<sup>6</sup> E. H. Blair, *Indian Tribes of the Upper Mississippi* (Cleveland, 1911), I, 367.

<sup>7</sup> Wisconsin Historical Society, *Proceedings*, 1906, 246, 247.

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cations of upper Mississippi sites. That of 1688, however, records with much accuracy the upper Mississippi region, and since we know Perrot to have been in Quebec in the autumn of 1687, there is every reason to suppose that he furnished Franquelin with the data appearing thereon. Not far above the mouth of Rivière Noire—the Black River of today—there is written *La Butte d'Hyvernement* (the hill of the wintering place), which seems to be intended for Trempealeau Mountain, near where the commandant and his party wintered.<sup>8</sup> Fort St. Nicolas at the mouth of the Wisconsin, and Fort St. Antoine, above the Chippewa, both founded by Perrot, are likewise indicated.

Just when Perrot left his wintering place on the Mississippi and built Fort Antoine higher up the river is not entirely clear, probably it was in the spring of 1686. Certainly he was upon the upper river until the spring of 1687, when he left to join Denonville's expedition against the Iroquois. During this year and a half in the Sioux country Perrot had amassed a stock of furs worth 40,000 livres. In his absence on the warpath, these were left stored at the mission house at Green Bay, which was burned by hostile Indians with the loss of all his peltry.<sup>9</sup>

In the autumn of 1687, Perrot set out once more for the Northwest to retrieve his ruined fortunes, and visit again his Mississippi posts. The winter ice was not yet out of the rivers when he pushed forward from Green Bay to reach Fort St. Antoine, where the Sioux received him with acclaim. There in May, 1689, he took possession of the Sioux country in the name of the king of France, annexing the Minnesota and St. Croix river districts and all the headwaters of the Mississippi.<sup>10</sup>

One of the witnesses to this document was Pierre Charles le Sueur, an explorer and trader in the far Northwest, whose work was to supplement that of Perrot. Six years later Le Sueur built a fort on Pelée Island in Lake Pepin, which was maintained about four years, during his own absence in France. When he returned, and ascended the Mississippi from its mouth to the Minnesota,

<sup>8</sup> For a partial reproduction of Franquelin's map of 1688, see E. D. Neill, *History of Minnesota* (Minneapolis, 4th ed., 1882), frontispiece.

<sup>9</sup> Blair, *Indian Tribes*, II, 25.

<sup>10</sup> *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, XI, 35, 36.



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the remains of both Fort St. Antoine and his own island fort were plainly to be seen.<sup>11</sup>

More than one-fourth of the eighteenth century passed away before another attempt was made to build a post on the upper Mississippi. The Fox Indian wars had made the Fox-Wisconsin waterway untenable and any approach to the Sioux had to take the difficult route from the end of Lake Superior through the tangled marshes and ponds at the head of the Mississippi.

In 1727, however, the French government determined to erect a post among the Sioux. In September of the same year the new fort was erected, amid imposing ceremonies, on the Minnesota side of Lake Pepin. The failure of the expedition against the Foxes the following year made this post untenable, however, and it was hastily abandoned by the alarmed garrison.<sup>12</sup>

In 1731, the Foxes being temporarily subdued, another expedition to build a Sioux post was placed in charge of René Godefroy, sieur de Linctot.<sup>13</sup> With him went his son Louis René, Augustin Langlade and his brother, Joseph Jolliet, grandson of the explorer, one Campeau, a skilled blacksmith, brother of the one at Detroit, and Father Michel Guignas, chaplain of the expedition.

They arrived on the Mississippi in the autumn of 1731, and according to the official report built "a fort On the Mississipy at a Place called the Mountain \* \* \* (la Montagne qui trempe dans l'Eau) \* \* \*"<sup>14</sup> The winter did not pass without events. During the deep snows food became so scarce that Linctot was obliged to send his voyageurs and traders to winter in the camps of the Indians. One of the voyageurs named Dorval had a thrilling experience with refugee Foxes, fleeing from an attack of mission Iroquois and Detroit Huron. Later some of the same fugitives came to Linctot to beg for their lives. The Sioux began coming in

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<sup>11</sup> Pierre Margry, *Découvertes et Etablissements des Français* (Paris, 1882), V, 413.

<sup>12</sup> *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, XVII, 10-15, 22-28, 56-59, 77-80.

<sup>13</sup> Linctot was born in 1675 at Three Rivers, Canada, where communication with the northern country was frequent, and where many retired officers, missionaries, and fur traders dwelt. Linctot entered the colonial army as ensign, being sent in 1718 with the expedition that established a post at Chequamegon Bay, where he was chief in command, 1720-22. The next year we find him second in command at Detroit.

<sup>14</sup> *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, XVII, 151, 168, 169.





LA MONTAGNE QUI TREMPE A L'EAU, AS SEEN FROM BRADY'S PEAK

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large numbers when they learned of Linctot's presence, and a camp of Winnebago wintered near by.

The succeeding years were replete with danger and difficulty for the officers and traders of the little Sioux post. Although the Foxes had been defeated and large numbers of them destroyed, desperate remnants remained scattered over the western country, and attacking parties of mission Indians and others allied with the French made frequent excursions to harass the wretched fugitives. The Sioux promised protection to the French, but their situation among the fierce belligerents was almost that of prisoners. In April, 1735, one of the Jesuits wrote from Quebec, "we are Much afraid that father Guignas has been taken and burned by a tribe of savages called the *rénards*."<sup>15</sup> The anxiety in Canada over his fate was allayed, however, the same summer, when Linctot finally arrived in the colony bringing an immense quantity of beaver skins and other peltry.<sup>16</sup> He reported that he had left Father Guignas with but six men at the little fort in the Sioux country, and asked for himself that he be relieved from command.<sup>17</sup>

To succeed Linctot in the post of the Sioux the governor-general of New France chose Jacques le Gardeur, sieur de St. Pierre, sending him with a party of twenty-two men to make their way to the upper Mississippi.<sup>18</sup> This small convoy reached its destination late in 1735, and early the following spring St. Pierre determined to remove the post twenty-five leagues (about sixty miles) higher up the Mississippi.<sup>19</sup> There for a year they held a hostile tribe at bay, employing every device of strategy

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<sup>15</sup> R. G. Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations* (Cleveland, 1900), LXVIII, 255.

<sup>16</sup> *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, XVII, 230.

<sup>17</sup> Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations*, LXVIII, 281; Margry, *Découv. et Etabl.*, VI, 572, 573; *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, XVII, 274, note.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques le Gardeur, sieur de St. Pierre, was a grandson of Jean Nicolet, discoverer of the Northwest. Born in 1701, he had been at the Chequamegon post commanded by his father and was conversant with several Indian languages. He had taken part in the expedition of 1728 against the Foxes, and after his experience with the Sioux commanded a detachment against the Chickasaw. Later assignments took him to Acadia, Lake Champlain, and the Saskatchewan, whence he was recalled to western Pennsylvania, where in 1753 he received Maj. George Washington on an embassy from Virginia. Two years later he was killed in battle.

<sup>19</sup> *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, XVII, 269, 270.

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and dissimulation, and finally, on May 30, 1737, abandoned their post with all its goods and belongings in order to save their lives.<sup>20</sup>

The site of St. Pierre's post is located approximately for us by Jonathan Carver, who visited it in 1766, and noted the ruins upon Lake Pepin. "Here," he says, "I observed the ruins of a French factory, where it is said Captain St. Pierre resided, and carried on a very great trade with the Naudowessies.\* \* \* " In the next sentence he mentions Mount Trempealeau as sixty miles below this site.<sup>21</sup> The records would thus seem to show that the post near Trempealeau occupied by Linctot in the autumn of 1731, was maintained at the same site until the removal to the fort on Lake Pepin in the spring of 1736. Thirteen years later the French government established another Sioux post under the leadership of Capt. Pierre Paul Marin, a well-known Wisconsin commandant.<sup>22</sup> He was recalled two years later to serve on the Allegheny frontier, and his son Joseph succeeded to the command. The latter maintained his post for three years, but during the French and Indian War was obliged to withdraw the garrison and destroy the post—the last under French occupation upon the upper Mississippi.<sup>23</sup>

To recapitulate, the posts on the upper Mississippi<sup>24</sup> during the French régime so far as documentary evidence shows, were:

1. Perrot's wintering establishment, 1685-86.
2. Fort St. Antoine, probably 1686-89.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 269-74.

<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Carver, *Travels* (London, 1778), 56.

<sup>22</sup> For a sketch of this officer, see *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, XVII, 315, note.

<sup>23</sup> Edward D. Neill in Macalester College, *Contributions* (St. Paul, 1890), 1st ser., 214, 218, locates Marin's post on the west side of Lake Pepin near Frontenac, Minn.

<sup>24</sup> The posts at and below the mouth of the Wisconsin are not included in this survey.

<sup>25</sup> Fort St. Antoine and Fort Perrot were identical. Before he had seen Franquelin's map, Neill postulated two separate forts—Perrot and St. Antoine. This he impliedly withdraws in his article in *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, X, 300. Lyman C. Draper perpetuates Neill's error in his discussion, *ibid.*, 358. He was interested in refuting Butterfield on the Prairie du Chien post, and accepted Neill's earlier statement without comparison with his later conclusions. This error of two forts, Perrot and St. Antoine, is repeated in Mississippi Valley Historical Association, *Proceedings*, IV, 93, 94.

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3. Le Sueur's trading post on Pelée Island, 1695-99.
4. Fort Beauharnois, 1727-28.
5. Linctot's post, probably 1731-36.
6. St. Pierre's post, 1736-37.
7. Marin's post, 1750-55.

The writer believes that the first and fifth of these posts were located near Mount Trempealeau, and that there is much reason to think that the exact site has at length been discovered and explored.







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